

# Harry Potter, witchcraft, magic and Classics

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Study of the Classics is often associated with the traditional British boarding school, to which Harry Potter's school, Hogwarts, has some similarity. The presence of a few Latin references is only to be expected, perhaps. But the classical allusions in Harry Potter's world have a dynamic force of their own, serving to enrich the magical significance of the characters and actions described in the books. *Omnibus* readers familiar with the exploits of Harry Potter will not be surprised to learn that Harry's creator, J K Rowling, is very conversant with Classics, having studied French and Classics at Exeter University.

## Hogwarts and Latin

Like a traditional boarding school in the muggle world, Hogwarts has a school uniform, four houses, an annual competition for the house cup, a slightly old-fashioned ethos, an emphasis on games, and so on. As we might expect the school has a Latin motto – *Draco dormiens numquam titillandus* ('Never tickle a sleeping dragon'). Obviously this is sound advice in any language, and Harry would probably be the first to agree. However, the demands of the Triwizard tournament and Harry's adventures in the Chamber of Secrets make it more of a pious hope than a practical possibility. There is perhaps a deeper meaning in the motto: *dracon* is the Greek word for 'snake' as well as 'dragon', and readers will immediately see two connections:

1. Lord Voldemort's affinity with snakes, and his ability to converse with them in Parseltongue.
2. The name of Harry's arch-enemy at school, Draco Malfoy – a dark wizard in the making, if ever there was one.

I feel sure that we can expect more 'slithering' adventures in the remaining books!

When we meet the staff we note a classical theme. Many have Latin or Greek first names. The headmaster is Professor Dumbledore, the greatest wizard of his age. Dumbledore is the epitome of a wise and fatherly head teacher, an unfailing champion for good against the Dark Arts: his first name is Albus (Latin for 'white'). The strict Potions master is Severus ('strict') Snape; the deputy head mistress is Minerva McGonagall: to be named after Minerva, the Roman goddess of wisdom, is of course very proper for a teacher; the gigantic gamekeeper with his ruddy complexion is Rubeus Hagrid. The Latin word *rubeus* actually refers to blackberries, and almost all Latin words starting rub- are connected with redness. The caretaker, always on the look out for misbehaving students, is Argus Filch, whose name conjures up memories of Argus the hundred-eyed keeper whom Hera set to watch over Io (the object of Jupiter's adulterous desires). Sibyl Trelawney, of course, teaches Divination: her predecessor, the famous Sibyl at Cumae, was also a prophetess, as readers of Aeneid 6 will know. Although not a teacher at Hogwarts, the Minister of Magic is Cornelius Fudge: perhaps we could infer a link with the aristocratic and powerful Romans of the *gens Cornelia*.

One of my personal favourites among the teachers is 'Mad-Eye' Moody, the latest in a string of Defence Against the Dark Arts teachers. For a variety of reasons, Hogwarts has so far been

unable to keep any DADA teacher for more than one year. They have all been colourful characters, but none more so than Mad Eye Moody. His real first name is Alastor: this might seem merely like an eccentric spelling of Alastair, but "alastor" is the name for the Avenging Deity, the spirit of revenge with whom Clytemnestra identifies herself at *Agamemnon* line 1501. The connection with the plot of Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire? My lips are sealed.

Other characters in the books have names with very strong Classical links, but their names are intimately connected with the plot, and it would spoil the surprise to discuss them here. I invite readers to consider for themselves.

Not all Harry's teachers have Classical first names. The school librarian is Irma Pince and Poppy Pomfrey is the kindly witch in charge of the school hospital – Harry and his friends frequently need her ministrations. I suspect that her name is not an abbreviation of Penelope, but rather that she is named after the flower that gives us opium. Then there is Harry's second year Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, Gilderoy Lockhart. But Professor Lockhart's massive incompetence as a wizard (and as a teacher) makes one wonder whether he deserves a Classical name. There again, as the five times winner of Witch Weekly's Most-Charming-Smile Award, it is quite possible that Gilderoy changed his name to something he felt more glamorous.

So far Ms Rowling has not divulged the first names of some members of staff, namely Professors Sprout, Quirrell, Binns, Vector and Flitwick, together with Madam Hooch, the games teacher. But, as there are another three books planned in the series, no doubt there will be further revelations.

## Spells and Latin

The spells to be found in Harry Potter's world have Latin resonances throughout. This is as one might expect. In the muggle world, the Middle Ages were, so to speak, the Golden Age of witchcraft, and for the mediaeval muggle-in-the-street Latin was the language of power and mystery. In the absence of a real knowledge of Latin grammar and syntax, his/her best shot was to make up something that sounded right. So in the mediaeval muggle mind there was a strong link between Latin, the language of religion, power and mystery, and witchcraft, the antithesis of religion. Note the phrase *Hocus Pocus*, which is generally assumed to be a corruption of *Hoc est Corpus*, the words of consecration in the Latin Mass, when the bread is elevated. Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable states that the phrase is 'the opening of a ridiculous string of mock Latin ... (*Hocus pocus, toutous talontus, vade celerita jubes*).' This is exactly the sort of rubbish an uneducated muggle would invent. However Hogwarts' charms and spells are much more convincing: 'Lumos!' for light, 'Expelliarmus!' to disarm someone. Harry's arch-enemy, Draco Malfoy (note the first name), temporarily incapacitates Harry with a spell of *Tarantallegra*, which sets Harry dancing uncontrollably, and when he cries 'Serpensortia!' a long black snake shoots out of the end of his wand. During a wizard duelling match the umpire parts the duellists with a cry of 'Finite incantatem!' Elsewhere Harry tries to master a particularly difficult spell, which conjures up a guardian to help him.

The words are ‘Expecto patronum.’ Here we have a precise and grammatically correct Latin phrase, meaning ‘I am waiting for my patron/guardian/defender.’

Some Classicists might be offended by the blatant disregard of spelling, grammar and syntax (except in the last spell). But spells recorded in muggle literature also show this same perversion. Spells, it seems, like many aspects of magic, require perversity. Muggle studies of witchcraft in the Middle Ages reveal a perverse reflection, or inversion, of Christianity – the upside down cross, the backwards recital of the Lord’s Prayer. Witches were often accused of not swallowing the Host when it was administered during the Eucharist, but keeping it in their mouths for later use in their secret rites. But such a heinous sin could not go unpunished.

### **Harry Potter and Homer**

Back to Harry Potter. We see that there are a lot of classical undertones in the books; J K Rowling, like her hero, does not parade her knowledge, yet it runs throughout the books (as does her wit and humour). Of course there is a dark side, and plenty of excitement - even fear - enlivens the narrative. Furthermore those who find a persistent motife of loss and bereavement can argue a strong case. Overall, though, the Harry Potter books reveal a fascinating insight into another world, yet one surprisingly like our own. The balance between ordinary and extraordinary reminds me strongly of another master story-teller's technique: in Books 9–12 of the *Odyssey*, Homer too stresses the homeliness of his most fantastic characters – Polyphemus whistling as he returns with his firewood and ordering his flocks like any shepherd, or Circe singing at her loom, as Greek housewives did. Perhaps J K Rowling has not yet reached the status of Homer, but like Homer her books exert a fascination for young and old alike. Like Odysseus her hero moves easily between the world of magic and the mundane. Like Odysseus, Harry Potter is remarkably resourceful. Unlike fans of Homer, fans of Harry Potter can look forward to more adventures!

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